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Russian nationalism three years after the annexation of Crimea

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The annexation of Crimea and Russia's military action in the Donbas in 2014 have revealed a major potential for a revival of nationalist sentiments in Russian society. The wave of 'patriotic' attitudes that swept through the country back then has enabled the government to co-opt the rhetoric that is typical of nationalist groups. The Kremlin has used this period to shore up its legitimacy among the public and step up control of specific organisations. This has resulted in changes to the structure of the nationalist movement. A weakening was recorded mainly in relation to nationalist organisations that are independent from the government and those organisations which had been involved in the fighting in the Donbas in the initial stage of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

For the Kremlin, nationalist ideology and nationalist organisations that are unable to act independently are a handy political instrument. They are mainly being used to build support for the government and to consolidate power in Russia. At the same time, the fear that independent nationalist movements may become empowered and organisations that are dependent on the authorities may become emancipated poses a potential threat to the country's internal stability. This makes the Kremlin strive for greater control of those nationalist groups that still remain somewhat independent.

Nationalist organisations

In ideological terms, aside from features typical of nationalist movements, including placing emphasis on national identity, viewing the need to defend national interests as the most prominent task of the state and elevating such interests above those of the individual, most Russian nationalist organisations are characterised by imperialist tendencies and in particular by the conviction that it is crucial to maintain and even expand Russia's zone of influence. According to the ideology which these organisations support, two main lines of Russian nationalism can be identified: the imperial line and the ethnocentric

line¹. Organisations belonging to the first line include monarchist movements and organisations associated with the Orthodox Church, organisations that subscribe to the idea of uniting the areas of the former Russian Empire, those that support anti-Western attitudes, paramilitary organisations, and organisations dealing with historical politics. The ethnocentric line, for its part, is represented by groups that support anti-immigrant policy and promote the supremacy of ethnic Russians over other members of society. The division into two lines is a certain simplification. In practice, nationalist groups

¹ See Katarzyna Chawryło, Russian nationalists on the Kremlin's policy in Ukraine, *OSW Commentary*, 29 December 2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-12-29/russian-nationalists-kremlins-policy-ukraine>

active in Russia are strongly fragmented and non-homogeneous in terms of the views they promote and the form of their organisation (a large number of these organisations remain officially unregistered). Aside from the main characteristic of the nationalist movement in Russia, i.e. the fact of subscribing to specific ideological lines, such divisions also reflect specific organisations' degree of dependence on the government and their attitude towards the Kremlin's policy (in particular their attitude towards the war in Ukraine).

A large number of organisations that fall within the ethnocentric line of nationalism remain in opposition to the Kremlin.

In 2011–2015, the most prominent organisation under the ethnocentric line of nationalism was “the Russians” (*Русские* or *Russkiye*), which supported the plan to transform Russia into an ethnically unified state and stemmed from the former Movement Against Illegal Immigration, which had been dissolved some time ago. In 2015, a court in Moscow considered “the Russians” an extremist organisation, which resulted in its dissolution. At the same time, the political activity of all three leaders of this movement has been hampered or prevented: Aleksandr Belov and Dmitri Dyomushkin are serving prison sentences and Vladimir Basmanov is in exile. Numerous other smaller organisations have sprung up from this group. In their quest to recruit new members, they compete with each other to a certain degree. These organisations are subject to relatively strict controls by the government and are generally not granted permission to organise legal public gatherings. Therefore, in their activities they focus on organising minor scale events such as lectures, debates, expeditions, tours and training sessions. Vyacheslav Maltsev, politician and blogger, has recently become a prominent figure in a nationalist movement which is in opposition to the

Kremlin. He is the author of the political channel “Artpodgotovka” on YouTube, which has gained popularity and gathered a group of new activists including individuals active in the unofficial “New Opposition” movement (Mark Galperin, Ivan Beletski, Denis Romanov, Yuri Gorski). To avoid being tried for extremism, Maltsev left Russia, which will hinder him from maintaining his popularity among nationalist groups.

A major portion of organisations that belong to the ethnocentric line of nationalism remains in opposition to the Kremlin. The ideological spectrum of these movements is very broad, and some of them, regardless of their dislike of the Kremlin, actively support Russia's activity in Ukraine. These organisations include radical nationalist and right-wing movements such as the neo-Nazi organisation, *Restrukt*, and certain groups centred around moderate nationalists, such as the movement centred around the *Sputnik i Pogrom* website, which emphasises ethnicity-related issues and supports imperial and anti-Western rhetoric (the government has recently blocked access to this website). Organisations hostile towards the Kremlin which nonetheless support Russia's involvement in the Donbas include the group centred around the nationalist Bolshevik party, *The Other Russia* (the so-called “natsbols” or *нацбол*), established by eccentric writer Eduard Limonov. Although this group used to be one of the most active nationalist movements in opposition to the Kremlin, at present it has reached an impasse.

A major portion of organisations that belong to the imperial line of nationalism support the policy pursued by the government. Usually, these groups are financially dependent on the Kremlin, they are allowed to function unimpeded as long as there is demand for their activity on the part of the state administration. One example of an organisation whose main task is to combat opposition groups, channel radical right sentiment using nationalist rhetoric and manifest support for the government, is the *Anti-Maidan* movement established in 2015.

Its leaders include individuals loyal to the Kremlin – Aleksandr Zaldostanov (also known as The Surgeon), the leader of the nationalist motorcycle club Night Wolves, and Dmitry Sablin, member of the Federation Council, one of the leaders of the Battle Brotherhood, an organisation that groups war veterans and retired soldiers.

Football fans represent a unique group associated with nationalist circles. From the Kremlin's point of view, they are a potential tool to be used in provocations.

The organisation Night Wolves, a component of the Anti-Maidan movement, enjoys personal support from Vladimir Putin that he demonstrates publicly. Each year it receives significant funds under the state subsidy system. Other organisations making up the Anti-Maidan movement include the National Liberation Movement (NOD), which supports imperialist and anti-American rhetoric and at present seems to be the most active organisation supporting Russia's policy towards Ukraine and organising provocative actions targeting opposition groups. This organisation's very close ties with the Kremlin can, for instance, be confirmed by the fact that its members ran in the most recent elections as candidates put forward by Russia's ruling party (Yevgeniy Fyodorov was included on United Russia's candidate list).

The imperial line of nationalist movements also comprises organisations which are strongly pro-Kremlin in their views but are managed by the government in an undisclosed manner. One of these organisations is the Eurasian Youth Association, which emphasises Russia's civilizational uniqueness and supports the plan to boost integration with the post-Soviet area and with China. The organisation's creator and ideologist is Aleksandr Dugin, who responds to certain demands for propaganda on the part of the government in that he challenges liberal ideas and promotes militarism and the concept of

Russia's supremacy over the so-called Eurasian area. Organisations associated with the Orthodox Church and monarchist organisations, such as the Black Hundreds and the Association of Orthodox Warrant Officers, also have close ties with the government. The imperial line of nationalism is also represented by several organisations that receive official government approval. They include the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (a populist party having its representatives in the Duma), headed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and the nationalist-conservative *Rodina* party, currently headed by Alexei Zhuravlov (its former leader was Dmitri Rogozin, a politician known for his nationalist views and current deputy prime minister).

In the period of the 'Russian Spring' (pro-Russian riots and demonstrations in south-eastern Ukraine in 2014), nationalistically oriented volunteers ready to take part in the fighting in Ukraine began to form their own organisational structures. The most prominent figure of this part of the nationalist movement is Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov), former leader of pro-Russian separatists and retired Russian intelligence colonel. He created the Novorossiya movement that supported the plan to create a separate independent state in the Donbas. In the period of intense fighting, the Russian Imperial Movement was particularly active among organisations loyal to the Kremlin. At that time it was involved in training militants and sending them to the Donbas, whereas at present it deals with national-military education of young people². At present, volunteers returning from the Donbas are welcomed by many nationalist organisations as new members. However, most of these organisations have neither an attractive offer for these individuals nor support from the Kremlin.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/a-right-wing-militia-trains-russians-to-fight-the-next-war-with-or-without-putin/2017/01/02/f06b5ce8-b71e-11e6-939c-91749443c5e5_story.html?utm_term=.4673b709b849

Football fans are a unique group associated with nationalist circles. They are characterised by very aggressive rhetoric and a readiness to use violence. Despite the fact that frequently they are members of various nationalist groups, they have their own organisational structures comprising football fans specifically. From the Kremlin's point of view, they form a potential tool to be used in provocations, but they also pose a threat connected with their violent methods. At present, Russian football fans are among the world's most aggressive groups of this type. They have repeatedly been involved in riots organised during football tournaments abroad in which Russia's team took part.

Nationalism and xenophobia in Russian society

Despite the fact that in recent years the status of nationalist groups has declined, Russian society continues to be characterised by a relatively high degree of support for nationalist views. According to research conducted by the Levada Centre in August 2016, as many as 52% of Russians approve of the slogan "Russia for Russians"³. However, it should be noted that this mood does change to reflect specific events and the intensity of the nationalist narrative in state propaganda. Due to frequent appearances of celebrities and opinion-forming journalists supporting nationalist views (including Dmitri Kiselov, Maksim Shevchenko, Aleksandr Dugin) in media controlled by the Kremlin, nationalist ideology has made its way to the centre of political discourse. In this context, to challenge the idea that the nation, understood as a perceived cultural and political community, is the highest value in the public realm, is seen as a violation of the unofficial consensus and a move away from political correctness.

³ <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/11/intolerantnost-i-ksenofobiya/>

The level of xenophobia in Russian society also continues to be high – almost 60% of Russians report a dislike of other nationalities⁴. Russians clearly support a strict policy of curbing immigration – 70% of the population surveyed approved of the plan to limit the flow of representatives of other nationalities to Russia⁵.

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Russians particularly dislike migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, which is where the biggest proportion of migrant workers comes from. Regardless of the drop in the scale of immigration to Russia recorded over the last two years, Russians believe that the number of immigrants in their immediate surroundings is on the rise. The research has also shown that the majority of the individuals surveyed claim that immigrants destroy Russian culture, have a negative impact on the economy, contribute to an increase in the crime rate and take jobs away from ethnic Russians. Only a relatively small group of respondents (20%) opposes the plan to introduce limitations for any of the nationalities. Such beliefs have been of key importance for the popularity of those Russian nationalist movements that supported the plan to create an institutional framework to guarantee the supremacy of ethnic Russians over other nationalities. However, the support for radical nationalist groups enjoining their followers to use violence is much lower. It is noteworthy that there is a negative correlation between the attitude towards migrants from the Caucasus and the attitude towards the United States which is traditionally seen as hostile. In periods in which Russians expressed more hostile attitudes towards the United States, their attitudes towards

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

the residents of North Caucasus were more positive. This relation indicated that there is a need within society to seek an enemy and that this need is being boosted by state propaganda according to its current demand.

The year 2013 saw a culmination of nationalist and xenophobic attitudes⁶. This was due to the rising number of economic migrants in Russia and the lack of mechanisms for integrating them, as well as the fact that back then this sentiment was being boosted by the state propaganda machine across all-Russian TV channels. Manifestations of aggressive nationalist mobilisation within society included the ethnically-motivated riots that happened in Moscow's suburban Biryulevo district in 2013.

The Kremlin uses the nationalists it 'manages' as a tool for consolidating society and boosting support for the government.

Over the last three years, anti-immigrant feelings and inter-ethnic tensions have eased. This is due to a drop in the number of economic migrants and to the fact that the propaganda machine has been reoriented towards the conflict with the West. State propaganda outlets have begun to create a narrative that the West poses a threat to Russians and that it has a 'Russophobic' orientation. As a consequence, anti-immigrant rhetoric began to lose ground. Formerly, they were an area in which nationalist groups distanced themselves from the Kremlin.

The number of participants in the so-called Russian Marches organised each year since 2005 in Russia's biggest cities can be viewed as a touchstone of the power of nationalist movements. These demonstrations, which are independent from the government, showed their greatest potential in 2010–2013, when they were attended in Moscow by up to 6 000 individuals. Most of the participants were radically-inclined

nationalist-oriented youths. The number of participants in the Russian Marches did not rise any further and from the beginning of 2013 it began to decrease. This was partly due to the effectiveness of administrative barriers created by the government and partly to the reorientation of social mobilisation to rhetoric emphasising the power of the state and the international threat. The period of the 'Russian Spring', followed by Russia's military activity in Crimea and in the Donbas, has triggered an elevated patriotic mood within Russian society and revived the nationalists' hopes. However, the mobilisation organised after the annexation of Crimea has diverted the attention of the general public from immigration-related issues, which are of key importance for the Russian nationalist movement, and caused a slackening in the nationalist movement itself. The proportion of individuals expressing dislike of immigrants declined (for example, the proportion of people experiencing dislike, fear and irritation towards migrants from southern republics fell from 61% in November 2013 to 42% in June 2014), which can be interpreted as a consequence of the drop in immigration to Russia caused by the economic crisis and the increasingly less favourable exchange rate of the rouble, as well as society's mobilisation in connection with the military conflicts waged by Russia. This places the movements which consolidate their supporter base using the ethno-nationalist narrative in a difficult situation.

The Kremlin's attitude towards nationalists

The Kremlin uses the nationalists it 'manages' as a tool to consolidate society and boost support for the government. Despite the fact that in recent months the activity of pro-Kremlin nationalist organisations has weakened, the government continues to strive to channel the actions of nationalist groups within the structures it controls. The form and the degree of

⁶ <http://www.levada.ru/2015/08/25/ksenofobiya-i-natsionalizm/>

governmental control of nationalists vary: from creating nationalist organisations and ‘manual steering’ thereof (the NOD organisation is one example), through supporting these organisations (for example, most organisations associated with the Orthodox Church and the Night Wolves), to infiltrating them and bringing about their disintegration (this happened, for example, to the ‘natsbol’ groups and “the Russians”).

Abroad, Moscow is winning over supporters in the form of radical right groups, mainly by criticising the United States.

In recent years, nationalist organisations controlled by the government have less frequently been used as tools in domestic politics, where they formerly served as instruments for combatting political opponents and demonstrating support for the Kremlin. They are still being used in foreign policy, under which Moscow is pursuing the tactic involving offering support to radical and populist movements in other countries. One example of such actions from the *soft power* repertoire was the International Conservative Forum organised in March 2015 in St. Petersburg by the nationalist *Rodina* party, attended by extreme right-wing organisations from Europe. Abroad, Moscow is winning over supporters in the form of radical right groups that potentially serve as a means of putting pressure on Western societies, mainly by criticising the United States, which is seen as a symbol of liberal democracy and globalisation, and by emphasising Russia’s moral supremacy. The Kremlin is trying to maintain a network of pro-regime organisations and is creating mechanisms of financial and organisational support for them. Each year, patriotically-oriented, Orthodox and nationalist organisations receive a major chunk of state subsidies for non-governmental organisations, as well as funds from oligarchs and businesspeople associated with the government. This group includes Vladimir

Yakunin, who funds Russian influence networks in Europe and ‘patriotic’ initiatives in Russia, and Konstantin Malofeyev, accused of sponsoring the units fighting in the Donbas, among other things.

The government is aware of the risk involved in supporting the nationalists, it fears that they may become emancipated and that new forms of spontaneous and independent social activity may emerge in Russia. Therefore, it is trying to control Russian nationalist groups and avoid making overt statements regarding ethnic differences, fearing that these views – which remain popular with Russians – may pose a threat to the state’s stability. The Kremlin is gradually trying to neutralise independent nationalist groups. These actions became notably stronger in the second half of 2014, when the government used a series of measures to subdue the so-called Russian March. Several individuals were arrested, including Aleksandr Belov, one of the event’s organisers, who openly criticised the ‘Russian Spring’. On the day of the march, a major demonstration was organised to express support for the government. Other manifestations of the system’s increasingly repressive nature towards independent nationalists included the arrest of Dmitri Dyomushkin, another leader of this movement, in April 2015 (in April 2017 he was sentenced to 2.5 years’ imprisonment). Attempts by the Kremlin to control and neutralise the radical factions of the nationalist movement have largely proved successful: most independent organisations are in deep crisis and pose no threat to Russia’s political stability. This is also evident in the declining number of participants in the Russian Marches – it diminishes with each year.

The Kremlin is trying to prevent the possible revival of nationalist groups that are in opposition to the government and which emphasise ethnic issues in their discourse. Attempts to quell this point of view can be confirmed, for instance, by the fact that the state media almost completely ignored the case of the killing of a four-year-

old girl by her carer from Uzbekistan in February 2016⁷. Rapprochement between nationalists and opposition groups with a different (non-nationalist) orientation is also seen as a potential threat to the government. This is why the government became concerned about the increasing popularity of Alexei Navalny, an opposition politician known for his nationalist views, and about the cooperation between liberal groups and nationalists centred around Vyacheslav Maltsev. Since the spring of 2017, the government has taken measures to break up the group centred around Vyacheslav Maltsev – Yuri Gorski, his collaborator, was arrested (he escaped from house arrest and at present is in exile), and Maltsev himself was charged with involvement in extremist activities, as a result of which he too fled abroad. The ruling elite fears that mass protests resembling those organised in December 2011 may take place again. Back then, anti-Kremlin rallies held on Bolotnaya Square were guarded by units composed of members of the independent nationalist movement.

One of the tools for controlling nationalist organisations is constituted by the legal measures preventing extremism. Reports compiled by the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis that monitors the situation of nationalist groups in Russia, suggest that in 2015 there was an increase in the number of individuals sentenced for extremist activities not covered by other provisions of the penal code (i.e. activities that do not involve violence)⁸. This type of control on the part of the government is facilitated by the fact that the leaders of independent nationalist movements in Russia seldom change and the state of the organisations themselves depends on the attitude and activity of their leaders.

⁷ Some media informed about an instruction from the Kremlin demanding that the case of the killing be omitted, http://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/01/03/2016/56d48e289a79477f2af24d82

⁸ In September 2015, 26 individuals served their sentences for political and propaganda-related activities and around 30 individuals for membership of banned organisations (however, these were mainly radical Islamists), <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/09/22/609638-tyurma-za-slovo>

Alongside the shifts in the Kremlin's narrative regarding the conflict in Ukraine (abandoning the plan to include the Donbas in the Russian Federation and to create a separate state organism there called Novorossiia), the role of nationalist movement activists in the conflict with Ukraine weakened, which also reduced their hopes regarding Kremlin policy. After the 'Russian Spring', most nationalist organisations independent of the Kremlin have been in crisis – their membership and activity have decreased.

Nationalist attitudes within society are deep-rooted and enduring.

These organisations lost their distinctiveness when, in the period of the 'Russian Spring', a large segment of them toned down their criticism of the government. It is noteworthy that on the day that the Federation Council issued its consent to deploy and use Russian troops abroad, leaders of several nationalist organisations (including "the Russians", which was independent from the government) announced that they would defend Russians in Ukraine and other parts of the world⁹. Several organisations have reached a deadlock – these are mainly the radical organisations that supported the 'Russian Spring' and opted for recognising Novorossiia as an independent state organism to be created on the basis of separatist republics in south-eastern Ukraine. Most of these organisations are in favour of reviving the plan to create Novorossiia or include the Donbas in the Russian Federation. Some continue to be involved in a support initiative for Donbas separatists (for instance, they organise so-called humanitarian aid convoys). The involvement of nationalist groups in the war in Ukraine is much smaller than in 2014. Should this change, it will not be down to efforts by specific organisations but as a result of a shift in the Kremlin's political strategy.

⁹ https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2014/03/01/n_5985181.shtml

Prospects

Nationalist attitudes within society are deep-rooted and persistent. In the future, nationalist sentiments and ethnically-motivated tensions are likely to rise if the economic crisis lessens and economic migrants from post-Soviet states return to Russia, which remains their primary foreign destination for work purposes. If this is the case, the crime rate may rise and ethnically-motivated clashes may be organised (such clashes happen regularly in marketplaces in Moscow and other big cities). The questions of migration and nationality policy, which are hot topics in Russian politics, are likely to be discussed both by the government and by the Kremlin's opponents in the campaign ahead of the 2018 presidential election. In the long-term perspective, any drop in the government's approval rating or a sudden internal crisis will likely increase the risk that the Kremlin may look for social support by making increasingly strong references to nationalist ideas and by confronting external enemies.

For the Kremlin, nationalist organisations that are loyal to the government and are 'managed'

by it will form a convenient tool for shaping the public mood. This is why they will be held in reserve for deployment as and when required, regardless of how insignificant their activities are. It is very likely that they will be used by Russian services to escalate tensions in those parts of the world that are of key importance for Russia, due to these organisations' ties with radical organisations abroad. The crisis of independent nationalist groups that stand in opposition to the Kremlin is likely to continue. Their prospects of prevailing in the contest with pro-regime organisations and the media, for playing the role of advocates of nationalist views and serving as a mouthpiece of public opinion, remain negligible. Similarly, it is unlikely that in the short-term perspective the nationalist mood within Russian society, which has recently shunned political involvement, will translate into active participation in independent nationalist movements. Due to the fact that their resources are considerably smaller, reconstruction of the independent organisations' capabilities is unlikely.

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